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ABSTRACT

A 3-year classroom study of learning styles among students of advanced English-as-a-Second-Language composition in Taiwan is reported. The study gathered data on 81 students' preferred learning styles and classroom tasks through closed-item and open-ended questionnaires, writing conference interviews, and student journals. Results indicate that (1) students can often identify and articulate learning style preferences, (2) data about learning style preferences are collected best from multiple sources; (3) local classroom research is necessary to understand the learning styles of sociocultural groups, (4) learning style preferences of Chinese students are not homogeneous, (5) nontraditional learning tasks may be accepted more easily when linked with traditional ones, (6) the perceptual learning style preference questionnaire used can also serve as a guide for syllabus design, and (7) information about learning style preferences can better inform composition instruction. Composition tasks and teaching aids are classified according to related learning styles, and students' self-reported achievements, ratings of the usefulness of different instructional tasks, and suggestions for course improvement are tabulated and discussed. Contains 39 references. (MSE)

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Applying Learning Styles Research to
Improve Writing Processes

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Applying Learning Styles Research to Improve Writing Processes

Nathan B. Jones

Abstract

Following a brief review of selected literature about learning style research with potential relevance for composition studies, this paper presents a 3-year classroom study of 81 advanced EFL composition students in Taiwan. The study identified their preferred learning styles and classroom tasks through closed-item questionnaires, open-ended questionnaires, writing conference interviews, and journals. The study discovered evidence that (1) students can often identify and articulate learning style preferences, (2) data about learning style preferences are best collected from multiple sources, (3) local classroom research is necessary to understand the learning styles of sociocultural groups, (4) learning style preferences of Chinese students are not homogeneous, (5) non-traditional learning tasks may be more easily accepted when linked with the more traditional, (6) Reid's (1987) Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire can serve as a guide for syllabus design, and (7) information about learning style preferences can better inform composition teachers of how to improve instruction.

Introduction

For native speakers, writing is often a burden, maybe even a torture. For non-native speakers, the task is especially daunting. The result is that many EFL students may dread English composition class.

EFL composition teachers may help to reduce the dread by applying learning style research to develop composition tasks

appropriate for the learning styles of students. This paper reports the results of a study at National Tsinghua University of Taiwan that examined how to apply learning style research--in particular Reid's (1987) Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire--to satisfy better the needs of Chinese EFL writing students.

Literature Review

Most researchers generally distinguish between the terms "learning styles" and "learning strategies." From a phenomenological point of view, a learning style is a set of behaviors that enable someone to adjust to a particular environment (Gregorc, 1979). As Willing (1988) points out, individual differences in learning styles are often attributed to cognitive, emotional, and sensory influences. Dunn & Dunn (1978, 1979) have gone considerably further by identifying 18 elements of learning styles, organized under the categories of environmental elements, emotional elements, sociological elements, and physical elements. Gregorc (1979) speculates that differences in learning styles are probably the results of differences in inherited traits, sociocultural norms, and inner natures.

In the context of language teaching, learning strategies are specific steps taken by language learners to acquire, store, and apply a target language (Oxford, 1989a, 1989b; Oxford, Lavine, & Crookall, 1989). According to Oxford, factors that might affect the selection of a language learning strategy would include the language being learned, duration of the study, metacognitive awareness, age, gender, affective variables, attitude, motivation,

personality, aptitude, career orientation, national origin, language teaching methods, task requirements, and learning styles.

Research on learning styles and strategies indicates that both are important to learning. Evidence suggests that learning styles influence success in general educational programs, even career choice (Cavanaugh, 1981; Dunn & Carbo, 1981; Witkin, Moore, Goodenough, & Cox, 1977). Learning styles are also important to second language learning. Research has shown that students with a more field-independent style may tend to enjoy several learning advantages, such as more overall success in language achievement (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Hansen & Stansfield, 1981; Stansfield & Hansen, 1983), in applying deductive strategies (Abraham, 1985), in monitoring language use (Abraham, 1983), in adjusting to both formal linguistic and functional language tasks (Carter, 1988), and in performing well in oral comparisons of target language production skills (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986).

Teachers are advised to encourage students to identify their own learning styles, to incorporate in classroom lessons the different learning styles of students (Melton, 1990; Oxford, 1990), and to match students by learning style to participate in small-group activities (Melton, 1990).

L1 research into the relationships between learning styles of adults and writing achievement have shown mixed results, indicating that more research is still needed. On the positive side, Parker (1991) has reported that persons with right hemisphere specialization may benefit significantly more when taught writing

with matching right hemispheric exercises. Likewise, Grout (1990) has found that high school seniors who have matched learning styles with their teachers enjoy class more and have better attendance. However, Cole (1990) has reported that in a college composition class, presenting students with prewriting activities tailored to match their learning styles appears to have little effect on writing ability, self-perception of writing, or writing apprehension. What is more, some classroom-based studies have found few, if any, significant links between pedagogical adjustments for field dependence-independence with gains in writing ability (Bryant, 1985; Fabien, 1984; Wilson, 1984).

How to apply effectively learning styles research to the teaching of L2 composition is a developing field in the L2 literature. Along with L1 writing studies by Jensen & DiTiberio (1984, 1989) and Held (1983), an L2 writing study by Carrell and Monroe (1993) has attempted to apply the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) as a measurement tool of personality, then to correlate the 5 personality profiles identified by this instrument with the preferred ways of learning and writing described by L2 writing students. Although the MBTI is a well-established personality assessment for native speakers of English, its validity and reliability for EFL/ESL populations has yet to be adequately established (Reid, 1990). Distortions in meanings caused by language and cultural misunderstandings may happen among those EFL/ESL students who complete it, which greatly limits its value in L2 research.

As this literature review suggests, what is needed is research including valid, reliable instruments to assess learning styles among EFL/ESL composition students, then to examine how this knowledge could be applied by EFL/ESL composition teachers to better inform their instruction.

The Study: Purposes, Setting, Subjects, and Procedures

There were five purposes for conducting the study. These were to (1) identify the perceptual learning style preferences of Chinese students enrolled in an advanced EFL composition class at National Tsinghua University (NTHU), (2) identify the kinds of composition-related learning tasks preferred by the students at the beginning of the course, (3) classify and implement composition tasks and teaching aids by perceptual learning style to help accommodate the learning style needs of the students, (4) assess student opinions of the course and the tasks, and (5) examine the results of the study for possible implications for composition teaching and theory.

I conducted teacher action research (Gay, 1987; Nunan, 1992) while teaching 5 sections of advanced EFL composition to 81 English majors over about a 3-year period at NTHU in Hsin Chu, Taiwan. The advanced course, which meets 2 hours per week for 16 weeks, is a graduation requirement emphasizing the development of research paper writing skills. To determine the expectations of students about the course as well as their learning style preferences, I administered in the first week of class learning style preference surveys, including the English version of Reid's (1987) Perceptual

Learning Style Preference Questionnaire and my own open-ended pre-course surveys. Near the end of the course, I presented students with an open-ended post-course survey to identify their reactions to the course and its tasks.

I selected Reid's learning style questionnaire because of its carefully established validity and reliability (Reid, 1987; Reid, 1990), along with its high potential for application in EFL/ESL writing course contexts (Reid, 1993). Briefly, Reid's questionnaire attempts to determine major, minor, and negative learning styles for 6 major style preferences: (1) Visual: Seeing things in writing, (2) Auditory: Listening to explanations, (3) Kinesthetic: Participating in physical activities, (4) Tactile: Working with materials by hand, (5) Group: Studying with others, and (6) Individual: Studying alone.

To complement the data from Reid's questionnaire, I administered my own open-ended pre-course and post-course surveys. To ensure honesty of reporting, I encouraged students not to identify themselves on the open-ended surveys. I used the open-ended format as a complement because, as Nunan (1992) maintains, "responses to open questions will more accurately reflect what the respondent wants to say" (p. 143). To analyze the data from the open-ended surveys, I applied a key word analysis (Nunan, 1992) to "generate categories made from the statements of the respondents" (p. 146). Following this, I organized statements into descriptive categories and quantified the data by using a frequency count of descriptive statements for each category. The open-ended questions

of the pre-course surveys asked students to identify their preferred goals and teaching-learning activities for the course: (1) What would you like to learn in this class? and (2) What can I as the instructor do to help you to achieve your goals?

In addition to collecting information from the questionnaires and surveys, I collected supplementary data by meeting at mid-term with each of the 81 students privately in my office to discuss their progress in the course and their concerns about how to improve their writing. Thirty-two of the conferences were audiotaped for later analysis. For the remainder, I wrote summaries immediately after each conference of the important points raised.

Another helpful source of supplementary data came from journal assignments completed by 59 of the students. In these assignments, I invited them to describe their writing processes and preferred ways of learning English. The students were otherwise free to focus on any aspect of the topic they liked and to write as much or as little as they wanted.

Results and Discussion

Identification of Learning Styles

As Table 1 suggests, the data I collected from 81 students using Reid's questionnaire indicate that the Chinese students generally had two major learning styles (Kinesthetic, Tactile), 3 minor learning styles (Visual, Auditory, Group) and 1 negative style (Individual). The results generally complement Melton's findings for EFL students in the People's Republic; however, my results were different from both Melton and Reid in two respects.

Whereas Reid and Melton reported Group learning as a negative style preference, my students generally reported it as a minor one. Furthermore, Reid and Melton found that Chinese students may perceive Individual learning to be a minor or major learning style, but mine generally reported it as a negative style.

Table 1

Means of Chinese Learning Style Preference Selections

	Visual	Auditory	Kinesth.	Tactile	Group	Individual
Reid	13.55	14.09	14.62	14.52	11.15	12.41
Melton	12.16	12.63	13.80	14.33	10.49	13.75
Jones	12.96	13.14	14.83	13.94	12.11	11.11

*Note: Major style 13.5 or more, Minor style 11.5-13.49,
Negative style 11.49 or less

Table 2 presents the data of the first question for the pre-course survey: what would you like to learn in this class? The students wrote a total of 107 comments, which I organized into 13 major descriptive categories. Twenty-four expressed interest in learning general academic writing skills, without specifying what those skills might be. Others were more specific. Fifteen wanted to improve diction, 12 the organization of writing, 11 the expression of written ideas, 10 the applications of English to real-life situations, 8 the command of sentence structures, and 8 their critical thinking skills. In contrast, only 6 expressed a desire to learn about other cultures, 5 non-writing skills (like speech), 3 learner autonomy, 3 research skills, 1 knowledge of the outside world, and 1 revision strategies for writing.

Table 2
Summary of Goals Recorded on Pre-Course Surveys

Item	Frequency
1. General Writing Skills	24
2. Diction	15
3. Organization	12
4. Clear Expression	11
5. Practical Applications	10
6. Sentence Structures	8
7. Critical Thought	8
8. Cultural Knowledge	6
9. Non-Writing Skills	5
10. Learner Autonomy	3
11. Research Knowledge	3
12. Outside Knowledge	1
13. Revision Strategies	1
Total Comments	107

*Note: N = 81

Table 3 presents data about the students' comments on the second pre-course survey question: What can I as the instructor do to help you to achieve your goals? The students wrote a total of 122 comments, which I divided into 13 descriptive categories. Forty-six wrote that they expected the teacher to serve a more traditional, teacher-centered role of transferring knowledge to students and interpreting information for them. Likewise, 22 expected the teacher to correct errors, 16 to provide models of good writing, 9 to assign a lot of homework, 6 to lead in-class discussions, 5 to hold individual conferences with students, and 4 to apply pressure on students to work hard. In contrast, 3 wanted the teacher to avoid assigning much homework, 3 to encourage learner autonomy, 3 to avoid applying much pressure, 3 to provide inspiration for the class, 1 to encourage multiple revisions of text, and 1 to arrange for peer reviews of papers.

Table 3

Summary of Pre-Course Expectations of the Instructor

Item	Frequency
1. Communicate Information	46
2. Correct Errors	22
3. Provide Models	16
4. Assign Much Homework	9
5. Lead Class Discussions	6
6. Hold Individual Conferences	5
7. Apply Pressure to Study	4
8. Limit Homework Amount	3
9. Encourage Learner Autonomy	3
10. Avoid Applying Pressure	3
11. Provide Inspiration	3
12. Encourage Revisions	1
13. Arrange Peer Reviews	1
Total Comments	122

*Note: N = 81

As the pre-course survey and the Reid questionnaire data indicate, composition students in this study reflected the same general learning style preferences in 4 perceptual categories as Melton's group; however, mine were more open to Group learning and less enthusiastic with Individual learning activities. Probably reflecting this trend, 11 comments on the pre-course surveys specifically requested the Group-related classroom tasks of in-class discussions and conferences.

What is especially interesting about these results is the strong support for more traditional tasks recorded in the data of the pre-course surveys. Most of the students preferred the teacher to apply largely traditional, teacher-centered instructional methods to show them the specific skills associated with drafting academic writing and the various elements of essays and research papers. Teacher lectures, error correction, modeling of writing,

and leadership of discussion were highly (although not universally) favored. This finding suggests that although Chinese students may have multiple learning styles as Reid, Melton, and this study report, they apparently still prefer teachers to assume a more traditional role, one that may limit exposure to other teaching methods that may exercise potentially valuable learning styles. Hence, sociocultural norms appear to be an important influence on the final learning style preferences of students that must be taken into consideration when interpreting data derived from standardized learning style questionnaires and surveys like Reid's Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire.

Comments in the journals tended to confirm this point: 40 of 59 students mentioned their desire to learn under a teacher's strict guidance, reasoning that this is a traditional, sometimes unpleasant, but usually effective way to learn. Wrote one, "Growing up we think that our teachers and professors are gods. Of course they aren't, though we respect their knowledge. We do our best to learn what they say."

Another interesting discovery was the depth and the commitment of student views about appropriate writing pedagogy. Much has been written in the literature of EFL/ESL composition pedagogy about the need to avoid prescribing formulas and clear models for students to emulate, as this might impede the expression of ideas and writing as a heuristic (Gorman, 1979; Raimes, 1987; Zamel, 1983, 1985, 1987). Moreover, some have argued that agreeing on the criteria of a well-written paper may be highly problematic (Johns, 1993; Zamel,

1985, 1987). However, as reflected in the results of the pre-course surveys, the students appeared to be demanding more of an emphasis on product than process in the teaching of composition. They wanted to be explicitly taught and shown by the teacher the conventions of an academic paper and, what is more, they expected the teacher to provide clear models for them to emulate.

Their comments on the pre-course surveys did not reflect the naive assumption that a single composition model or a single set of composition criteria would serve in all academic situations, either now or in the future. Rather, they were sophisticated consumers of pedagogy. They wanted to learn some basic processes, patterns, and formats that could be transferred after appropriate adjustment to other academic situations with different readers. Their sentiments are echoed in these remarks:

Since I plan to go states for graduate school, so I hope the teacher will show us how to write a good research paper. Then, it will be easier when we learn from our new teachers.

Do more to teach us the techniques (basic ones) of structure of a good composition.

Whats the standard of a good composition? By what do you think of a good writing?

Working with the students in conferences and discussing with them their ideas of how to learn to write supported this view. Fifty of 81 students described at some point their hope that I would clearly explain or otherwise direct them in my ideas of how to write well. Reflecting the trend, one said, "Each teacher has his own way, his own ideas of what is good. I want to hear your ideas, learn your ways."

Developing Tasks and Teaching Aids for Learning Styles

The advanced English writing course at NTHU focuses on developing the skills needed to draft formal writing for academic audiences. For this reason, I ask students to write a problem-solving research paper that explores an important social issue on a topic of each student's choice. Although I encourage students to write to explore topic ideas, to express personal views, and to work in pairs or small groups to critique each other's papers, I also introduce students to models of what I consider to be good essays and research papers, sometimes lecturing to them about paragraph organization, thesis statements, transitions, supporting evidence, text citations, and references. I even prescribe a particular format for the title page of the research paper.

Nevertheless, I am aware that my students, comfortable with traditional teaching and learning styles, need to develop their multiple learning styles. The class includes a variety of activities intentionally presented to challenge them to develop their learning styles for writing in each of the 6 perceptual learning style areas identified by Reid's questionnaire.

Visual learning is a learning style generally associated with traditional classroom environments. It comes through the presentation of the written word. Although only 30 of my students on Reid's questionnaire identified it as a major learning style, the demands registered on the pre-course survey for Visual learning activities were strong, so I focused on it. Providing students with models of good writing, written summaries of important lecture

materials, outlines on the blackboard of important lecture points, checklists to guide the completion of assignments, worksheets with questions or problems for discussion, and a composition textbook supplemented with handouts all help to develop this style.

Auditory learning is another style closely tied with traditional classroom activities, such as the lecture. Almost half (38) of the students identified it as a major learning style on Reid's questionnaire. Although I focused on it with occasional lectures about grammar and composition, I also arranged whole-class and small-group discussions of reading assignments, peer reviews of papers in progress, student oral reports of research paper findings, and student-teacher writing conferences.

Next is the Kinesthetic learning style. Although learning by doing and experience is generally not very common in traditional Chinese classrooms, 57 of the students identified it on Reid's questionnaire as a major learning style preference. Therefore, I incorporated several Kinesthetic activities to complement the more traditional Visual and Auditory ones. Tasks encouraging students to learn via physical experience would include conducting peer reviews of rough drafts, switching the location of the class during a discussion to the downstairs lounge or coffee shop, offering individual conferences with students in my office, taking students on library tours to help them find published evidence for research papers, encouraging students to collect interview and observational data for research papers, and having students present oral reports of research paper findings at the end of the term. Likewise, I

might organize students into workshop groups, in which they would prepare a role play of a successful or unsuccessful peer review session, teacher-student writing conference, or information-gathering interview with an outside source for the research paper. Workshop groups might also be invited to orally critique for the class model papers or to present short lessons on topics of composition from the textbook or other reference works.

The fourth style preference of Tactile learning was selected by the students as a major learning style. This is not surprising, since hands-on experience with materials can also be very kinesthetic. Corresponding tasks included multiple revisions of the research paper, peer reviews of papers in progress, completion of self-evaluation checklists of papers, journal writing, occasional in-class writings, teacher-student writing conferences, and completion of a writing portfolio. For the latter, the students presented to me at the end of the semester all course work, including rough drafts, in a neatly organized, aesthetically pleasing portfolio for final evaluation.

As for the Group learning style preference, the 81 students as a whole identified it as a minor one. However, closer scrutiny of the data reveals some complexity: 26 selected it as a major style, 19 as minor, and 35 as negative. Hence, while 45 claimed to have at least some preference for it, 35 preferred not to learn in Group tasks. Coupled with the pre-course survey data revealing strong student preferences for more traditional teacher-fronted

activities, it appeared that implementing Group-oriented tasks could be problematic.

Sentiments about group activities appeared in the journals. Twelve wrote about the advantages of group work in their writing processes, noting how group activities provided them with more opportunities to learn from others, to express their opinions without fear, and to receive feedback on writing from a wider audience. In contrast, 9 others in the journals complained about group work. Their comments focused on the change of roles for both students and the teacher. In their eyes, the teacher should assume a more traditional role of disseminating information. They perceived group work as a waste of time. One student summed it up this way: "Who knows more about the subject? Who gets paid to teach? So who should teach the class?"

I responded to this information by planning for several activities to benefit those who already preferred this learning style. Activities would include peer reviews of writing, small-group writing workshops, and teacher-student writing conferences. Out of respect for those who indicated dislike of Group learning, I was careful to explain to students at the beginning of a Group-related activity its intended pedagogical value and the desirability of developing different learning styles to build communicative competence in a foreign language. I also was careful to balance Group activities with more traditional, teacher-fronted ones, such as giving a short lecture to summarize intended learning outcomes following a small-group workshop.

Finally, the students generally selected against Individual learning on the Reid questionnaire. Fifteen selected it as a major style, 29 as minor, and 36 as negative. Although support for less-traditional Group learning was present but limited, it was even weaker for more-traditional Individual learning.

These mixed results may have been caused by the course context in which the students completed Reid's questionnaire.

The complementary pre-course survey data help to illuminate the situation. On the one hand, the students wanted to improve their writing skills. They wanted to learn by reading appropriate models of good writing, which is an Individual learning style preference. On the other hand, they appeared reluctant to be left on their own to struggle through the writing process. Several in their comments on the pre-course surveys and the journals also expressed fear or even hostility toward composition as a course of study, undoubtedly reflecting frustrations from previous courses. Since writing at some point in the process becomes a solitary, highly personal, creative act, the task for them appeared daunting. The following student comments on the pre-course surveys sum up the sentiment clearly:

Actually, I think writing is a hard work, and feel afraid of it.

I hate writing. However, since I cannot help but choose this class, I will do my best to cooperate.

I've no intension to learn anything. Learning is for most of the time boring to me.

My response to these data was to address the problem head on. I presented several activities designed to support students

throughout the writing process and, whenever possible, to change negative perceptions of Individual learning style preference within the context of the composition class. Activities included using workshops to introduce students to prewriting strategies for generating topic ideas, providing students with clear directions and models to guide them in the completion of assignments, meeting with students individually in writing conferences to discuss their questions and concerns, encouraging each to pick a research paper topic discussing a social problem of special interest to himself or herself, and having peer editing sessions wherein classmates could share their insights and concerns as supportive partners in the writing process.

Table 4 presents a summary of the classification of tasks and teaching aids I often use to address the perceptual learning style preferences identified by Reid's questionnaire. This classification scheme is a reminder of the need to include tasks containing one or more of each of the six perceptual learning style preferences. Since my students generally report Kinesthetic and Tactile learning styles to be major preferences, I plan for a larger number of these tasks.

Table 4

Classification of Composition Tasks and Teaching Aids
by Perceptual Learning Styles

<p><u>1. Visual</u> Writing Models Checklists Worksheets Written Summaries of Lessons Blackboard Writing Textbook Handouts</p>	<p><u>4. Tactile</u> Textbook as Reference Portfolio Assessment In-Class Writing Journal Writing Multiple Revisions Peer Reviews Conferences</p>
<p><u>2. Auditory</u> Lectures Discussions Student Oral Presentations Small-Group Workshops Peer Reviews Writing Conferences</p>	<p><u>5. Group</u> Small-Group Discussions Small-Group Workshops Small-Group Oral Presentations Peer Reviews Writing Conferences</p>
<p><u>3. Kinesthetic</u> Small-Group Discussions Small-Group Workshops Small-Group Presentations Peer Reviews Conferences Oral Presentations of Research Results Library Tours Interview Data for Research Paper Observational Data for Research Paper</p>	<p><u>6. Individual</u> Prewriting Activities Clear Assignments Clear Modeling of Writing Group Support Available</p>

Student Assessments of the Course

At the end of the course, I administer an open-ended post-course survey that asks students to write responses to these questions: (1) What did you learn about writing in this class? (2) Which activities were most helpful to you? (3) Which activities

were least helpful? (4) What might I have done to better help you to improve?

As Table 5 shows, 36 students commented that they learned how to draft a formal research paper, 26 to improve their organization skills in writing, 22 to collect and apply evidence for a formal academic paper, 12 to communicate written ideas more clearly, and 10 to write appropriate references. Other comments included 6 from students who reported learning how to deliver effective oral presentations, 5 to improve revision skills, 4 to think in English more often, 4 to improve mechanics, 3 to care more about social issues, 3 to think more critically about issues, 2 to improve diction, and 1 to learn more effectively from classmates.

Table 5
Summary of Reported Class Achievements

Item	Frequency
1. Understand Research Paper Process	36
2. Organize Writing	26
3. Collect and Use Evidence	22
4. Communicate Ideas Clearly	12
5. Use References Effectively	10
6. Improve Oral Presentations	6
7. Understand Revision Skills	5
8. Think in English	4
9. Improve Mechanics	4
10. Care about Social Issues	3
11. Think Critically	3
12. Improve Diction	2
13. Learn from Classmates	1
Total Comments	134

*Note: N = 81

Table 6 presents the activities identified by students as the most helpful. Thirteen mentioned teacher-student writing conferences, 12 group discussions, 12 peer reviews of papers, 9

multiple revisions, 9 practice writing a research paper, 7 models of good writing, 6 oral presentations of research paper findings, 4 whole-class discussions, 4 sentence structure exercises, 3 journal writing, 2 group workshops on references and citations, and 1 teacher corrections.

Table 6

Summary of Reportedly Helpful Activities

Item	Frequency
1. Teacher Conferences	13
2. Group Discussions	12
3. Peer Reviews	12
4. Multiple Revisions	9
5. Practice Writing	9
6. Writing Models	7
7. Oral Presentations of Research	6
8. Class Discussions	4
9. Sentence Structure Exercises	4
10. Journal Writing	3
11. Group References Workshops	2
12. Teacher Corrections	1
Total Comments	82

*Note: N = 81

Table 7 displays student perceptions of the least-helpful course activities. Fifteen wrote that all were helpful, in one way or another. However, 6 complained about having to focus on only 1 major paper for the term, 4 about workshops and lectures on references, 4 about sentence structure activities, 4 about giving oral presentations, 3 about peer reviews, 3 about group reports on parts of the textbook, 3 about small-group discussions, 3 about writing journals, 2 about lectures, 2 about the content of the textbook, and 1 about in-class writings.

Table 7
Summary of Reportedly Least Helpful Tasks

Item	Frequency
1. All Helpful	15
2. Only One Major Composition	6
3. References Workshops and Lectures	4
4. Sentence Structure Activities	4
5. Oral Presentations of Research Paper Results	4
6. Peer Reviews of Writing	3
7. Group Oral Reports on Textbook	3
8. Small-Group Discussion	3
9. Journals	3
10. Lectures	2
11. Textbook	2
12. In-Class Writings	1
Total Comments	50

*Note: N = 81

Student responses on the post-course surveys about what I could have done to help them learn more are presented in Table 8. Twenty-six recommended that no changes be made in the course, 10 that more assignments be given, 10 that there be more teacher-student conferences, 6 that I should lecture more often, and 6 that I should offer more detailed comments or corrections on composition assessments. As for the remainder, 3 wanted more models, 3 more vocabulary development, 2 more opportunities to revise, 2 more peer reviews, 2 more suggestions about reference books to purchase, 2 more in-class discussions, 1 better student morale in class, 1 better penmanship from the teacher, and 1 more prewriting activities training.

Table 8
Summary of Suggestions for Course Improvement

Item	Frequency
1. No Changes	26
2. More Assignments	10
3. More Conferences	10
4. More Lectures	6
5. More Comments and Corrections	6
6. More Models of Writing	3
7. More Vocabulary Development	3
8. More Revisions	2
9. More Peer Reviews	2
10. Suggestions on Reference Books	2
11. More Discussions	2
12. Improve Student Morale	1
13. Improve Teacher's Penmanship	1
14. More Prewriting Activities	1
Total Comments	75

*Note: N = 81

Generally speaking, the post-course survey results show that in the eyes of the students, the course was helpful in developing valuable writing skills. Better understanding of the process of writing the research paper, of organizing writing, of collecting and applying evidence in academic papers, and of communicating ideas clearly in writing were often cited as tangible, practical benefits of taking the class.

The data also suggest that by the end of the course non-traditional activities were very popular with these Chinese students, implying that the combination of presenting both traditional and innovative classroom tasks together works to overcome some sociocultural expectations of appropriate teaching and learning activities. More specifically, small-group activities such as group discussions and peer editing were very popular, which

corresponded with the results of the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire.

Another benefit of this course's arrangement is the improvement it appears to generate among student attitudes toward composition, as reflected in comments presented in the post-course surveys. I counted a total of 22 comments on the pre-course surveys that reflected anxiety or frustration about having to take composition, with 8 of these being rather extreme. However, on the post-course surveys there was only 1 such comment. On a related point, students on the post-course surveys wrote that the course should retain its present form in the future. Fifteen wrote that all tasks were beneficial to them and that no changes should be made in the content. This evidence reflecting student satisfaction suggests that teachers who systematically identify student learning styles and plan classroom tasks accordingly may help their students to adapt to the rigors of a composition class, maybe even help them to enjoy it.

Implications for Teaching, Theory, and Research

I found that students can often logically articulate the reasons for their perceptual learning style preferences and preferred classroom tasks. When developing and implementing theories of composition pedagogy, theorists and teachers should avoid underestimating the wisdom of many students about how to develop aspects of their own potentials. Respondents on the pre-course surveys of this study strongly favored a teacher-centered learning environment, which would guide them through the steps of

writing a research paper. Because several were anxious about taking an advanced composition course, they felt an initial need to receive explicit guidance from the instructor through lectures, corrections, models, and conferences. As their own words reveal, they did not believe that there could be a clear set of rules or solutions to apply in every future situation. Rather, they wanted to have the experience of drafting a research paper under one teacher's guidance, to give them a solid framework which could later be adjusted as necessary to accommodate other teachers in various academic contexts. This implies that EFL composition teachers might need to be more directive at times with their students than current trends in composition theory might reflect.

Another finding relevant for teachers is that research accounts of learning style preferences of sociocultural groups should be interpreted cautiously and be supplemented, whenever possible, with local classroom research. Although the results of the learning style preference selections of Chinese students in Reid's study (1987) were different in important ways from the results of Melton's study (1990) in three of six perceptual categories, the data from this study more closely parallel Melton's results, with important differences found in the two perceptual preferences of Group and Individual. (See Table 1.) This suggests that generalizations about the preferred learning styles of a particular sociocultural group may be tentative. Whenever possible, responsible classroom teachers should try to explore the learning style preferences of the students they actually teach.

There are also potential implications for theory and research. As a case in point, data about learning style preferences should be collected from several sources, not only one. Administering a standardized self-reporting questionnaire is a traditional, convenient way to conduct educational research about attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, such a questionnaire offers only a limited view of learning style preferences, which is why open-ended questionnaires, conferences, and journals can be used to collect additional, important data that might otherwise be overlooked.

On a related point, theoretical generalizations based upon survey research about the learning style preferences of different sociocultural groups should be rigorously tested by context-rich research within specific, authentic classroom environments. The Chinese students of my study selected on the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire the Individual learning style preference as a negative style, in contrast to the popularity of this style with Chinese students in the Reid and Melton studies. Many intervening variables might have caused the different results. However, it is plausible that this difference would likely be attributable, at least in part, to the different contexts in which, and the purposes for which, the students were filling out the questionnaire. My respondents were also my composition students. Given this context, as the remarks in the pre-course surveys, the conferences, and the journals suggest, some students might well have viewed questions associated with the Individual learning style with some apprehension, possibly because of negative experiences in

previous composition courses. In a non-writing EFL course, the questionnaire's results might well have been different.

This does not question the reliability of the instrument as a research tool; rather, it points out the need for researchers using self-report data to describe fully the contexts in which their data are collected and to interpret the results carefully.

Their comments resembled these:

I feel better when I write with someone who I can talk to. But I always read and study grammar alone.

Writing isn't very interesting to me, so I like the outside activities. I don't mind as much in other classes.

Because writing is hard for me, it makes me nervous. It's hard to listen and remember everything you say. It helps when you write it down. In other courses I don't have to worry about it.

Finally, a classification of tasks and teaching aids based on the constructs of the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire can be developed into a helpful organizational framework for a composition course. By grouping activities into each of the six construct categories, teachers could check to ensure that they avoid focusing too many of their tasks on a few perceptual learning style preferences at the expense of developing others. Rather, teachers could use the classification scheme to plan for greater variety of learning style activities, which could ensure that students favoring different perceptual learning styles would be accommodated. In addition, by being exposed to tasks that focus on a variety of learning styles, all students would be encouraged to develop a wider range of learning styles, which could help them to become more versatile learners.

Conclusion

As composition teachers continually search for ways to improve their craft, they could gain a potentially valuable perspective of their students' needs by identifying learning styles. Determining the learning styles of students takes some time and effort; however, the trouble is worth it. As this study indicates, L2 composition students are likely to respond favorably to a course when their perceptual learning style preferences are systematically addressed with both traditional and non-traditional tasks. The result is a more satisfying academic environment for both the teacher and the students.

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